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Crowe

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When Crowe was 18, he wrote his first autobiographical story—a piece for Rolling Stone about how he learned about sex. Much to his surprise, it was an instant favorite. The experience stuck with him when he began writing scripts, especially as he wrestled with the idea of making a film about his formative rock journalist days. For him, it's not so much of a leap from a commercial project like "Jerry Maguire" to the more personal "Almost Famous."

"I don't worry about whether what I write will mean anything to the rest of the world because the stuff that people respond to best has always been the most personal things—the scene that embarrassed you the most when you wrote it," he says one day, stretched out on an office couch beneath photos of various rock idols. Wearing shorts and a floppy T-shirt, he still looks more like a music writer than an A-list Hollywood director whose last film grossed $154 million and was an Oscar nominee for best picture.

"So I thought, maybe I could do a movie about really personal things, and it would be like my sex article. It would be the thing people liked the most. Still, it's hard, because you've got nothing to hide behind."

For years, Crowe worked on scripts that revolved around his rock 'n' roll adventures. One early version, "Ricky Fedora," chronicled two journalists on an all-night drive with an English rock band. But the story didn't come easily and other projects always intervened.

His mother always encouraged him. After all, she'd kept his room intact from when he was a teenager; everything was in boxes—old articles, interviews, backstage passes, fan mail, even hotel keys.

"I must have nine notebooks of early drafts of his script," says Alice. "Cameron had a really difficult time writing it because it was so personal. So he'd go off and write another script and then he'd be on the phone with me, saying, 'The boxes are calling.' Whenever Cameron would come talk to the kids in my class, he'd tell them to write what you know. So I'd say, 'Walk your talk. Write about your memories.' "

Still, Crowe was nervous. When he went to Danny Bramson, his music supervisor and one of his oldest friends, Bramson told him it wasn't a good idea to bare his heart: "I know you," Bramson told him. "You're too sensitive. Every bad review will be like a dagger in your heart."

But Crowe realized the clock was ticking. Most of his favorite memory films, Francois Truffaut's "400 Blows" and Barry Levinson's "Diner," were made early in the filmmakers' careers. When Crowe was making "Say Anything," he'd told director Lawrence Kasdan about his idea for a personal film. Several years later, Kasdan asked how the project was coming. Crowe said he was going to do something else next.

"Larry asked how old I was," Crowe recalls. "I told him I was 40. And he looked at me and said, 'Geez, I always thought you were younger.' "

Crowe laughs. "That's when I decided I better get going."

Alice's biggest fear was that the movie might paint her as too demanding. Cameron had told her not to talk to McDormand when she showed up for work, but his mother ignored him. "Alice got right to the point," the actress recalls. "She said, 'I find the character to be written a little shrill and I hope that you don't intend to play it that way.' And I said right back that I'm an actor, so it's not going to be me or you, it's going to be [the character]."

When I asked Alice what she said to McDormand, it becomes obvious that mother and son recall things a tiny bit differently:

Alice: "Cameron told me, 'Don't talk to Frances.' "

Cameron: "Mom, what I really said was, 'Stay away from her. She's won an Academy Award, just leave her alone. It's enough that you're even here, on the set!' "

Alice: "We got along fine. She had her little son with her and we just talked about kids and how I took Cameron with me around the country when he was little. . . ."

Cameron (jumping in): "And I'm looking at the two of them, yakking away, and I saw it all going down the tubes. Here I am, directing this great actress with my mom standing right behind me on the set. There were a lot of nights when I was doing takes and takes, imagining that the people on the set behind me were saying, 'Therapy would've been a lot cheaper,' and I'd call Mom and say, 'You got me into this!' "

Early in the film, Crowe's sister, (called Anita and played by Zooey Deschanel) leaves home with her boyfriend, bequeathing her record collection to her little brother. As the car pulls away, Cameron's mother pronounces, "She'll be back." After hearing her daughter whoop with joy, she says less confidently, "Maybe not soon."

In real life, his sister Cindy didn't talk to Alice for nearly a decade. They only recently had a tentative reconciliation at a family get-together, which Cameron hosted after he'd finished the film. Like most family squabbles, the fracas is complicated in origin.

"Cindy never got me, Cameron did," Alice says evenly. "I think in some ways I must have embarrassed her. For a teenager in high school back then, a mother was

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In the '70s, He Saw It All—and Lived to Write About It

'Almost Famous' triggers flashbacks for a scribe who documented the excesses and eccentrics of the scene.

By PATRICK GOLDSTEIN

One night I found myself in the company of several big-shot journalists who were regaling the dinner table with big-shot stories: being under fire in Vietnam, playing poker with the president and smuggling dispatches out of Uganda after a coup. Finally, to be polite, someone turned to me and asked if the onetime rock journalist had any war stories to tell. "I'm not sure," I hesitantly replied. "Does the time Sid Vicious tried to break a bottle of whiskey over my head count?"

Being a rock journalist in the 1970s was like covering an accidental war where no one was ever killed, except through the occasional drug-induced misadventure. The guns were electric guitars, the ammo made you very high and the nurses in the Red Cross tent were groupies hoping to get that all-access backstage pass that would let them cruise the headlining band's dressing room.

Rock writers were geeks before they'd invented the word, policy wonks in a world where the diplomats all wore black leather pants with codpieces. I wrote for anyone who paid cash money. My favorite was Creem magazine, which at its zenith in the early '70s published rock's most gonzo writers: Lester Bangs (the oracle of "Almost Famous"), Richard Meltzer, Nick Tosches, Nick Kent, Dave Marsh and Robert Christgau. As I watched the scene in "Almost Famous" where Cameron Crowe, trying to get backstage to do an interview, waves a copy of Creem at the backstage guard, all I could think was, "Hey, I had a story in that issue!"

As the movie suggests, journalistic ethics were a fluid thing. If the groupies ignored us, we slept with the record company publicists. It was hard to maintain a pretense of journalistic integrity when you woke up in the publicist's hotel bed in Milwaukee, asking her blearily what time your interview was with Rod Stewart. Of course, being a '70s rock star, Stewart would be hung over, cancel at the last minute and you'd end up flying to Detroit and then Minneapolis before he'd ever talk to you.

Courtesy of Patrick Goldstein

Patrick Goldstein, left, in the mid-'70s with E Street Band guitarist Steve Van Zandt.

Needless to say, watching "Almost Famous" brought back a rush of acid-flashback-style memories. Seeing Stillwater, Crowe's fictional band, play Cleveland's raucous Agoura Ballroom conjured up long-forgotten images of Iggy Pop rubbing glass shards into his chest and diving into the crowd, and Patti Smith holding court backstage, telling me the only thing that compared to a Who concert was a Mayakovski poetry reading (prompting a mad bookstore dash the next morning to find out who the hell this Mayakovski guy was).

Cameron's film perfectly captures the headlong spirit of the time, even if he sprinkles a bit more fairy dust on the era than it might deserve. Cameron and I were kids when we started as rock writers, but he was more mature than any of us. He also exuded a sweetness and enthusiasm that rock stars returned in kind. True to the Creem spirit, I was rude and sarcastic and got it back in spades. Elvis Costello angrily stalked out in the middle of an interview, convinced I was an obnoxious pest (and, oh, was he right).

Still, it's hard not to have fond memories: The Kinks' Ray Davies took me to the Russian Tea Room and taught me how to eat *foie gras*. Lynyrd Skynyrd's Ronnie Van Zant sat in the moonlight at the foot of his favorite Confederate war hero statue in Dotham, Ala., touting the great books I should read about the South if I wanted to understand the glory of lost causes. And the Who's Keith Moon treated me to a king's ransom of clothes on a shopping spree in Houston. ("Don't worry," he said, waving a fistful of credit cards, "We'll be long gone before they realize these aren't any good.")

It was like being a political writer in the time of Earl Long and Adam Clayton Powell. There were colorful characters everywhere and their excesses were part of their charm. Danny Markus a fabled Atlantic Records promotion man, used to give deejays joints with his initials—DSM—stamped on the side, like a brand of china. Keith Richards, skeletal as a mummy, was stoned every time I met him. Moon was so drunk that he passed out in the middle of an interview, but he told great stories before he hit the floor.

You loved these guys because they loved the music as much as you did. After a Faces concert in Chicago, Ronnie Wood and Rod Stewart insisted on tracking down J.B. Hutto, an obscure local blues man who was a cult figure in England. We found him playing in a dank South Side blues club, using a moldy $29 Sears guitar. Stewart and Wood were so awe-struck that they needed a few drinks before they got up the courage to introduce themselves.

At night's end, Rod slipped something into Hutto's pocket. The romantic side of me wants to believe it was a wad of cash, but maybe it was just the sock he had stuffed in his trousers backstage before the concert.

It was the '70s, it was rock 'n' roll and who knew it would be over so soon? □

Patrick Goldstein wrote for Creem and other music publications in the '70s and covered pop music for the L.A. Times in the '80s.

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